

CHAPTER 21

May 1, 2011

"In the movie I watched the other day this guy knocked down a tree using only his leg!"

"When the hell did that happen in Avengers?"

"No, not that! I watched one of my kung-fu movies yesterday."

As per usual, Chie had dragged Justin along on another one of her training expeditions. For once he'd like to be able to just sit down and talk like normal human beings do. But no, that apparently isn't extreme enough. Someone has to lose a testicle by the end of the day, or the day wasn't worth living through. Still, at the very least it seemed Chie wasn't trying to beat the ever loving crap out of Justin; at least not yet anyway. Instead she had been doing some stretching exercises while trying to hold a conversation with him. It was weird, considering Justin outright refused to make himself look like an ass by doing stretching exercises. It basically meant Chie was doing all these weird stretches while he stood there and watched.

"How does someone kick that hard...? Just practice?"

"If by practice you mean special effects, then yes."

"Well obviously it was fake! But there's gotta be someone out there that's done it before."

"I sincerely doubt it."

Chie seemed almost disappointed, much to his displeasure. Justin was concerned that she legitimately wanted to be able to kick a tree down using only her foot. She kicked hard enough as it was, he didn't need her ripping through his stomach when they were in the middle of one of their training sessions.

"Ch-Chie!"

Justin's usual smirk immediately drooped into a frown. *Oh fuck no, I recognize that voice.* Sure enough, it was Takeshi, making his way up to the two of them. From the looks of it, he was more than a little confused as to why Chie was stretching her limbs like that while Justin just stood there. Chie straightened up from her stretching position as she got a sight of Takeshi making his way up to them.

It took every fiber of Justin's being not to smack Takeshi for being a complete douche the last time they saw each other. Who has a lady fight their fights for

them? And over 1,000 yen, no less. Justin wasn't exactly rich, but 1,000 yen? Let it fucking go man.

"Oh, hey Takeshi..."

Chie's face had been neutral but a moment ago, as though she didn't have any particular disposition to the guy. It was strange considering she had brightened up a bit the last time they had met under these conditions, though I suppose that changed after his show of courage a few days ago. However, her eyebrows soon dropped into an angry stare. Justin had thought she was going to kick his ass for running like a coward, so what she said next took him by surprise.

"W-Were you robbed again?"

"No..."

Justin was more than a little confused. Why would she even consider helping this guy if he got robbed again? It's not like he was nice to her or anything, and god knows he was complete scum. *Maybe she's just a bigger person than I am...* Justin sighed.

"I took off right after that, right? So I thought I'd apologize..."

Justin still didn't like the guy, but he felt the tension in his brow loosen a bit. At least he had the guts to apologize.

"...Why don't you be a man and admit you ran away?"

Justin chuckled. He had almost assumed Chie had forgiven Takeshi already, and then here she was busting out an insult to his manhood. He would have applauded under normal conditions, but he felt it was better for the two of them to work it out on their own.

"Wh-What...? Were you this anal before?"

Justin coughed slightly. He admittedly had a dirty mind, so he didn't really think he meant anal as in "anal-retentive" at first. Even then, he was almost entirely positive that he had used anal in the completely wrong context. Chie seemed a bit flustered once she realized what Justin had started coughing over, her cheeks turning bright red. She wasn't really sure who she should be angry at, Takeshi for calling her anal, or Justin for thinking he meant anal in THAT way.

"Tch, if you lose that sunny attitude. You won't have anything left."

Justin stopped coughing long enough to hear Takeshi start ragging on Chie again.

"...Shut up!"

It was a very timid counter to Takeshi's attack. For whatever reason, she had decided not to go full-blown apeshit on his ass. So Justin decided to do it for her.

"Oh fuck off, Takeshi!"

"Huh!?"

Chie gave him a glare as though to tell him to just let it go, but Justin was having none of that. This guy had been ragging on her since day one, left her alone to face his muggers, where god knows what could have happened, and then he has the audacity to insult her. This wasn't just for Chie, this was for Justin. He wasn't going to let this guy drag her or anyone else through the mud any longer.

"Wh-What!?"

"You heard me! Chie saved your ass just the other day, and then you have the audacity to insult her? You're one real motherfucker of a gentleman, aren't you?"

"Now wait just a minute...!"

"No, you shut the fuck up! I'm tired of your bullcrap already! Let me make this absolutely clear, if I ever hear you bashing her like that again, I will finish the job those muggers started."

"Justin!"

Chie was appalled that he was acting like this. Sure Takeshi was being a dick, but to threaten him with physical violence just because he called Chie a name? That's crossing the line. Takeshi was just completely speechless. He probably wasn't used to having shit thrown back into his face.

"I-I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to her!"

Takeshi turned his gaze back to Chie before dropping it down towards the ground. Justin was having a hard time telling if he was mortified by Justin's outburst, or if he truly felt bad. Probably the former.

"It's alright, Takeshi."

Chie glared at Justin slightly. It's not like she couldn't handle herself, and yet here Justin was trying to fight her battles for her. Still... she supposed she should be grateful that he cared enough to step in to the argument in the first place.

"S-So... uh... what's up with Yukiko."

Takeshi nervously tried to change the subject. He never outright said sorry to Chie, much to Justin's disgust.

"I saw her with you guys the other day... She seemed weirdly cheerful... She had this funky laugh, y'know...?"

Was he going to start talking shit about Yukiko now? Justin just shook his head in disgust. Before he just wanted to smack this kid, but now? Now he was working out places to hide the body.

"That funky laugh...? That's how she really is."

"Oh, you've rubbed off on her, huh? I can't believe it... That's not Yukiko-san... She was better gloomy."

Alright, that's it. Justin was about to punch Takeshi in his smug face. Who does he think he is trying to tell people what they should and shouldn't be? First Chie, now Yukiko? No one would object to this guy getting a good ass-kicking. He was ready to take a swing at the guy when Chie suddenly spoke up. She sighed slightly before opening her mouth to talk.

"...Look. If you get into trouble again, I'll step in and help."

"Huh...? Oh... Uh... thanks."

"So why don't you shut your mouth about Yukiko!?"

Justin forcefully blinked, as though he wasn't quite sure he had just heard what he thought he heard. He knew Chie was protective of Yukiko, but she hadn't even defended herself from this guy. Justin was almost entirely positive she had a crush on him at one point. I mean, it makes sense. Dealing with all of his shit, getting jealous whenever he had his eyes on Yukiko. But here she was, not giving a damn about any of that. Justin smirked slightly before glaring at Takeshi again.

"You don't know anything about her! She's a good person, got it!?"

"Wh-What the hell!?"

Justin had never been prouder of Chie in all his life as Takeshi turned around to walk away. He was just about to give Chie one of those playful shoves the two gave each other when something Takeshi had mumbled under his breath caught his attention.

"...jesus, what am I going to do about Kurt's goons now..."

Justin's eyes dilated. *Kurt!? No, it can't be the same Kurt, right? Right!?* He suddenly made a mad dash for Takeshi, grabbing him by the collar, much to Chie's shock. She had half expected Justin to try and beat the crap out of him, much to her disapproval, so she was surprised when he instead took the opportunity to get up in his face.

"What did you just say!?"

“H-Huh!? I didn’t say anything! Let me go!”

“Who the fuck is Kurt!”

“Huh!? None of your business!”

Justin kned him in the groin, sending him down to the ground as he loosened his grip around Takeshi. Chie ran over to try and stop Justin, but to not much avail.

“Justin! Stop!”

“Give me a name, Takeshi, or so help me...!”

“K-Kurt Kimberly!”

Takeshi raised his arms into cowering position, hoping to protect himself if Justin went any further with his interrogation. Instead Justin stumbled away from Takeshi. Whoever this Kurt guy was, he was certainly involved with what was going on with Maya. He’d have all the answers, right!?

“Where is he...?”

“I don’t know! I don’t deal directly with him!”

“Justin, what are you doing!”

Chie had gripped at him by his upper arm. She was almost entirely positive that Justin was going to beat the living crap out of Takeshi if she didn’t. Takeshi soon got up and made a mad dash away from the two.

“What the hell is wrong with you!”

“That name... Kurt Kimberly...”

Chie’s glare softened the moment she realized what was going on. Justin recognized the name, which means it must have come up in another one of his dreams... Though he said that he had just been having the same dream over and over again, right?

“Don’t tell me it was another one of your dreams...”

“What the hell is he doing all the way out here...”

“You know him?”

“By name and occupation only. Remember that dream in the food court? Well, Kurt was there. He was selling Maya cigarettes...”

Chie’s eyes widened slightly.

"You think he might know something?"

"Kurt and Maya clearly knew each other well. He has to know SOMETHING."

Chie let loose her grip on Justin's arm. She hadn't really noticed her hand was still wrapped around it until just now, but even then, it seemed there was no reason for her to be restraining him. He had no intention of hurting Takeshi so long as he cooperated. And wouldn't you know it; Chie practically helped him get away. Justin didn't really hold a grudge, he knew why she had done it, but even then Chie felt like shit after she had realized why he had been acting that way. She sighed as she let go of his arm.

"I'm sorry..."

"It's alright. You didn't know." Justin sighed. "I should have said something sooner."

"You've known...?"

Justin gave a glance Chie's way, before letting out some hot air. Her eyes were wide with concern, her lips curved downwards with disappointment. She had thought he could trust her with anything, hell so did Justin, yet here he was hiding everything he knew away from her.

"I... I can't tell you. I'm sorry."

"Is it bad...?"

"I can't say for certain... but it sure looks that way."

Chie looked off to the side. She didn't want to force Justin into telling her something if he didn't want to, but she felt almost hurt that he couldn't share something with her. It must have been a painful experience of Justin refused to talk about it. Chie tried to smile, though the worry in her eyes was still shining through like the sun through the clouds.

"Well we're just going to have to find this Kurt Kimbler then!"

"How, we don't have any le-"

Justin paused.

"Hey wait a second. Takeshi was mumbling something when I heard him bring up Kurt... 'What am I going to do about Kurt's goons now,' I believe it was..."

"Huh? Wait, you mean..."

"Those bullies from earlier must be Kurt's men."

Chie frowned. The way Justin had beaten up one of the thugs... Kurt couldn't have been pleased to hear about that. It would make it difficult to get information out of any of the parties involved now. Hell, they didn't even know where they could find those thugs now. She sighed slightly as she averted eye-contact. Justin had been thinking along similar lines, as he let out some hot air from his cheeks. Jesus, nothing ever seemed to work out for him.

"Sorry about interfering earlier."

"Huh?"

Chie was surprised by the sudden topic change. She thought they had been trying to figure out where they could find Kurt, but here Justin was bringing the topic back around to Takeshi. Maybe Justin just didn't want to think about Kurt. Clearly if it wasn't a topic he was entirely comfortable confiding in Chie, thinking about it must have been a painful experience.

"I went a little overboard, huh?"

"It's alright. I know you were just trying to help."

"I know you could have handled it yourself, but... You know, you didn't say anything..."

Chie chuckled. It wasn't that this was a particularly funny topic or anything, and it was a particularly forced and awkward chuckle, but she felt like it was a good way of indicating that bygones should be bygones. Really, she thought Justin was out of his mind earlier when he had gone on one of his anger-fits, but in actuality he had just been trying to give her a hand.

"Well, I couldn't just stand by and let him rag on Yukiko like that..."

"Seriously, who the hell says 'she was better gloomy'?"

"An idiot?"

"Damn straight!"

The two laughed a bit, mostly because the awkward tension that had been filling the air had been broken. They had plenty of time to find out who this Kurt guy was; there was no need to get all worked up over it.

"You know... Takeshi did remind me of something. Way back, I saw Yukiko sitting by the road, holding a dog. I asked her what's up and she said she ran away from home... She'd picked up the dog, but her parents told her she couldn't have a pet, and that she's have to get rid of it... She looked like she was dead or something... I tried everything I could think of to make her laugh. And that's how we became friends."

Justin smiled softly. He wasn't sure why exactly Chie felt the need to share this with him, but he was sorta glad she did. It was heart-warming to say the least. I mean, what was his and Maya' story? They egged someone's house and then started to smoke cigarettes?

"From that moment... I told myself I'd protect Yukiko... "

She paused for a moment, averting her gaze away from Justin, and back towards the ground. Her eyes were shimmering with the slightest hint of tears. Justin wasn't sure why, though he could only expect it had to do with what she said next.

"But... Somewhere along the way, I messed up, and that shadow popped out... After that, I tried to focus on what's good about me. I swore to quit being nothing but the girl Yukiko can rely on... So I just tried my best. At finding the culprit and stuff... just generally being more reliable... That's all."

She paused for a brief moment, tears starting to roll down her cheeks.

"I feel like I missed the point..."

Justin looked at her for a brief moment before sticking his finger out to catch a tear that had been running down her eye. She seemed a bit caught off guard by the motion, but happy none-the-less. Justin wrapped his arm around her back, his hand on her opposite shoulder, her shoulder against his.

"That's the first step."

"...Thanks. You're too kind. Though... maybe just half a step?"

Chie started to blush that pinkish-color again. Justin was still completely perplexed as to why she only did that around him. Justin chuckled at her embarrassment.

"I wouldn't say KIND, but I'll take what I can get."

"Well what would you say then...?"

"I'm not even sure."

Chie smiled at him briefly before speaking again.

"I wonder if there's anyone out there who can say, 'This is what makes me worthwhile!' I guess everyone's looking for it."

"God only know I do."

"What are you talking about? There are plenty of things that make you worthwhile."

"Name one."

"You're a good person."

"I'm not sure I'd agree with you."

Justin's thoughts raced back to the dream he had, the one about Maya and the gun. His eyes faced towards the ground, in shame. You can't be a killer and a good person at the same time. Chie looked at him, the sparkle in her eyes gone. She hated when Justin beat himself up like this. It's not like he even did anything bad, he's just grasping at straws, literally putting himself down; and for what? She sighed as she tried to change the subject. She knew there was going to be no use trying to convince Justin that he was better than he gave himself credit for.

"Oh yeah... that dog Yukiko picked up? It's gotten really fat at my place."

Justin let go of his grip along Chie's shoulder. He was more than a little surprised by the comment.

"Wait, you took the dog in for her?"

"Mhmm. You should come by and see it sometime! It smells, but it's cute! Maybe I'll walk it over to your house."

Justin chuckled.

"And you ever doubted you and Yukiko were friends. Keeping the dog for her? That is literally the nicest thing I have seen someone do in... God, forever."

"Well I don't know about that..."

"Don't be so modest."

"I could say the same to you."

"Not modesty, honesty."

"You can't honestly believe some of the things you say about yourself, right?"

"If only you knew Chie. If only."